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SUBJECT: HUNGARY'S ELECTIONS: SOMOGY COUNTY (C-RE6-00145)

REF: STATE 22644

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Summary  
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11. (U) This cable continues Embassy's pre-election coverage from the provinces in the run-up to the April contest. On a March 10 trip to Kaposvar, Somogy County, local contacts described the city's electorate as inured to partisan politics and somewhat anxious about bread-and-butter issues such as job security and wages. With the election one month away, Emboffs visited this small city of 70,000 to meet with a range of local figures: a business leader, the local MSZP party chief, a high-school principal, two FIDESZ representatives, and a clergyman.

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Background  
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12. (U) Somogy County lies east of Zala County. Via the newly-reopened Sarmellek airport, the county hopes to further Lake Balaton's status as a tourist destination. Somogy County is also home to the Taszar air base, used by NATO during the Balkan wars. Local government covets Taszar for its development potential, but the GOH is looking to international investors for a capital infusion. Of Hungary's 8.1 million currently-registered voters, only 267,459 live in Somogy County (2002 figure). Turnout in 2002 was 67.96 percent in the first round, somewhat below the national average of 70.5 percent. Somogy will have eleven races: five party-list constituencies and six individual constituencies (Siofok, Balatonboglar, Marcali, Nagyatad and two in Kaposvar). In one of Kaposvar's individual-constituency races, voters gave MSZP Interior Minister Monika Lamperth 44.22 percent of the vote, against 45.52 percent for her rival, FIDESZ's Karoly Szita. However, Szita took the mayor's seat in Kaposvar, and Lamperth. Szita has since been fingered as a communist-era case worker who recruited agents for the secret police. In a February 2005 press conference in Kaposvar, top figures from the local FIDESZ organization, including county party-list MP Dr. Marta Matrai (Social and Family Affairs Committee Chair), declaring their belief in "the power of love," threw their support behind Szita, who is running once again for mayor. Of Somogy County's eleven parliamentary seats, FIDESZ holds five, MSZP three and MDF two (one seat remains vacant). (Note: In Hungary's election system, parliamentary candidates may run head-to-head against each other in individual constituencies; run on a party's county list, or on a party's national list. Together, the 176 individual constituencies, the 210 party-list constituencies in the counties and the 58 national party-list slots return 376 members to Hungary's national parliament.)

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Business Leader: SMEs Hard-Pressed, Unemployment Rife  
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12. (SBU) The Somogy County president of the National Association of Entrepreneurs Gabor Daxner is an engineer and the CEO of VAEPSZER, a company founded in 1986. VAEPSZER prepares sites for construction by draining excess water from the ground. Daxner told Emboffs that small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were struggling in the face of competition, and that the state should provide subsidies to ease their plight. He said he would not expect such support from a victorious MSZP. (Comment: A FIDESZ government may find it difficult to fund such support.) Tenders lacked transparency, according to Daxner, and the courts provided insufficient recourse against abuses. At the same time, he allowed that Kaposvar and the region were alive with construction projects, thus creating opportunities for his own business. Unemployment was a key issue in Somogy County, he declared, and stated that he observed significant long-term unemployment in the area. For example, he said, local employers would hire workers from the local labor office for three months minus one day, then go back and hire new ones. (Note: Workers who stay on past the three-month probationary period allowed by Hungarian law are much more difficult for employers to let go.) Official unemployment data, he insisted, reflected neither the true state of unemployment in Hungary nor its broader demoralizing effect. Against this backdrop, Daxner explained that party loyalties are directly related to economics, with traditions of land ownership and self-sufficiency among FIDESZ supporters and of dependency on the state among socialists. (Comment: Given FIDESZ's campaign promises of state support for SMEs, free medicines for children and the elderly, and an additional

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month's pension, a better explanation for the party's support among smallholders might be values-based.) (Note: Average monthly wages for Somogy County's blue- and white-collar workers are HUF 85,343 (USD 406) and HUF 164,547 (USD 784), respectively. Those figures do not include unreported income.)

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MSZP Leader on the Mayor's Mojo  
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13. (U) Interior Minister Monika Lamperth's campaign manager in Kaposvar, who doubles as the local MSZP party president, Robert Zsoldos recounted for Emboffs the contrasting messages by the two major parties. On recent visits to the city: according to Zsoldos, PM Ferenc Gyurcsany spoke of plans for Hungary's future and of its integration into Europe, while FIDESZ leader Viktor Orban told voters they were worse off than four years ago. On the local scene, Zsoldos described the popularity of Mayor Karoly Szita (FIDESZ) as personal rather than party-based. He claimed that Szita's alleged past as a secret-police case worker had tarnished his appeal, but admitted there were no local polls to demonstrate a drop in his numbers. He confirmed that Lamperth was running against FIDESZ vice-mayor Tamas Heintz in an individual-constituency race. (Note: Szita is not running nationally this time.) Zsoldos related how he had worked with Lamperth in Budapest on MSZP's working group on local government in 2001-2002. A local man, he loyally disputed Emboffs' suggestion that Hungary's 3,200 local-government bodies need consolidation. As homebodies, Kaposvar's residents are not much interested in international issues, said Zsoldos, and young people have little time for politics, although MSZP was persisting in its outreach to youth. Twenty-seven-year-old Zsoldos is himself younger than most party activists in Hungary,

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Educator on Those Left Behind  
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¶4. (U) Kaposvar's Mihaly Tanacsics Gymnasium, a high school, turns out the city's future elite. According to principal Ferenc Reothy, some eighty percent of the institution's students go on to university, and claimed many of the town's leading lights among its alumni. Kaposvar's schools were holding their own in the face of closures and social change, said Reothy, and Mihaly Tanacsics was attempting to build on existing programs in western foreign languages and information technology. Those hardest hit by change included former collective-farm workers, many of whom continued to live at the same location they always had, though there was little left to stay for. The high school participates in a nationwide scholarship program for disadvantaged youth, who comprised some two percent of the school's student population. Reothy stated that there were Roma children in the program, although he could not say how many. (Note: Under this program, eighth-grade students identified by their teachers as disadvantaged --generally, because their parents received an eighth-grade education or less-- are given a year of catch-up training, scholarships and dorm housing in preparation for onward education.) On bilateral issues, the principal described positive attitudes toward the U.S., formed in part through contacts with U.S. personnel formerly stationed at Taszar Air Base. (Note: Reothy is also a member of a foreign-relations board based at city hall.) On the local scene, Reothy characterized Kaposvar residents as uninterested in "ideology."

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FIDESZ Contacts Vow Pluck and Gumption  
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¶5. (SBU) In conversation with Emboffs, Kaposvar vice-mayor Tibor Juhasz (FIDESZ) described himself as a strong supporter of Viktor Orban, and frequently invoked his leader's name (e.g., "as Viktor Orban has said"). Together with Kaposvar FIDESZ president Gergely Jako, he presented a much harder line than Zala County MP Peter Cseresnyes on foreign affairs. The Russian President's apology for 1956 was not conspicuous enough, in Juhasz's view, and his "refusal" to meet with Viktor Orban in a one-on-one meeting was a mistake. In Juhasz's recounting, the Russians realized that they needed some kind of meeting with Hungary's possible next prime minister and went forward with an event involving all four party leaders. The vice-mayor then told Emboffs that "Hungarians were waiting, waiting for the Americans to come" in 1956, and that the U.S. should understand FIDESZ's December 2004 decision not to support mandate extension for the country's transport battalion under Operation Iraqi

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Freedom in that context. The vice-mayor also faulted MSZP for failing to support the Hungarian military. (Note: FIDESZ contacts often contrast the 1.75 percent of GDP devoted to the military in 2002, the party's last year in government, with the current figure of 1.18 percent.) U.S. visa policy toward Hungary was also misguided, he told Emboffs. (Note: Juhasz stated that he had relatives in Ohio who had been to visit Hungary, but he had not returned the favor.) Moreover, under Viktor Orban, a new GOH would be more assertive in promoting the rights of ethnic Hungarians abroad. "We're not talking about border revisions," Juhasz expressly articulated, but neither would Hungary hesitate to stand up to its neighbors. On other topics, our hosts complained of MSZP control over state media, and neither local figure was convinced of the necessity of local government reform.

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Cleric: Churches Face Some Unfair Criticism from Left  
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¶6. (U) Mild-mannered Father Laszlo Varga has served as a priest in Kaposvar for thirteen years. He stated that the

local church did not truck with political subjects, and received no funding from the FIDESZ-run city government -- rather, from parishoners and the bishops' conference. He observed that, after World War II, state expropriations deprived the Church of much of its wealth. Father Laszlo saw no involvement in politics on the part of the national Catholic radio station, except when "the left unfairly criticizes the Church." He told Emboffs of cordial relations with other churches in town, and of coordination on local charity projects, including consultations with the local Roma minority self government. He noted that the city's Roma did not always receive the social services and public support payments provided for by law. Within his own congregation, he stated that a significant number of young families was turning to the Catholic faith for community and spiritual succor. (Note: Of Hungary's "traditional" Christian churches --Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist-- the Catholic Church is the strongest in both Zala and Somogy Counties, and is also the largest nationwide.)

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Comment  
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17. (SBU) Although Kaposvar is visibly more prosperous than the only slightly smaller Nagykanizsa in neighboring Zala County, many of our contacts spoke in discouraged tones. Even the most optimistic among our interlocutors described locals as "homebodies" little concerned with the mayor's secret-police past. The rejection of "ideology" in politics,

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described by an older contact, also sounds typical of an older electorate reared on the sloganeering of a one-party state. Budapest's political bickering thus has little resonance in the provinces. The mayor in Kaposvar is thus likely to hang onto his seat, despite his past.

18. (U) Visit U.S. Embassy Budapest's classified website:  
[www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/budapest/index.cfm](http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/budapest/index.cfm)  
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